DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS, *probably the most influential of all Transalpine Humanists, was instrumental in shaping the course of scholarship, vernacular literature, education, politics, and religion from Spain to Sweden. Born in Rotterdam in 1466(?), the illegitimate son of a priest, he was educated at the famous school of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer. He then entered the priesthood. Ten years and many disappointments later, Erasmus was released from his vows, and he entered the University of Paris. His middle and later years were spent traveling from country to country, teaching and publishing as he went. In 1499 he journeyed to England where he became friendly with More and Colet, who encouraged him to publish the Greek text of the New Testament. The reading public was so avid for Erasmus' writings that at the time of his death in 1536 the printing presses were unable to keep up with the demand. His principal writings were all in Latin. Important among them are:* Adagia; Enchiridion militis christiani; Moriae encomium; Institutio principis christiani; Familiarum colloquiorum formulae; *and his* Diatribe seu collatio de libero arbitrio, *a classic treatise against Luther. Erasmus' Greek New Testament appeared in 1516.*

On the Philosophy of Christ

AT THE COMMENCEMENT of his defense of Christianity against the pagans, good reader, the illustrious Lactantius

Firmianus, whose eloquence was so greatly admired by St. Jerome, expressly wished that he be granted an eloquence second only to that of Cicero. He thought it presumptuous, I believe, to wish for an eloquence equal to Cicero's. But I, if there is aught to be gained by indulging in such wishes, might devoutly wish that an eloquence specifically different from Cicero's be granted me, an eloquence by means of which I might exhort and summon all men, as with a trumpet blast, to the most sacred and life-giving study of Christian philosophy, an eloquence which, albeit lacking in resounding phrases, would yet be possessed of greater efficacy than Cicero's. Or I might wish, if such eloquence were at all forthcoming, for that power of speech which the ancient poets attribute to Mercury who could, as if with a magic wand and a divine lyre, induce or destroy repose at will: who could plunge into the pit whom he willed, and recall thence those whom he would; or such power as the ancient fables assign to Amphion and Orpheus, to one of whom was imputed the capacity to move solid rock, while the other was said to have the power to charm oaks and ashes with his lyre; or that strength which the Gauls ascribed to their Ogmius, who swayed men as he would by means of tiny chains connecting their ears to his tongue; or that power which was of old attributed to Marsyas; or, to leave the realm of myth, that efficacy of speech which Alcibiades attributed to Socrates, and old comedy to Pericles: an eloquence which not only caresses the ear with its passing loveliness, but which leaves a permanent sting in the auditor's mind—an eloquence which holds, which metamorphoses, which sends the listener away totally different from when he came. We read that the noble musician Timotheus was able to rouse a desire for war in Alexander the Great by singing Doric strains. There were many as well, in days gone by, who regarded nothing as more powerfully persuasive than the entreaties known to the Greeks as *epodes*. If there anywhere exist such incantantions, if there is anywhere a power of song which can inspire, any Pytho who

can truly move the heart, would that they were available to me so that I might make apparent to everyone the most inspiring truth of all! But it is more appropriate that Christ himself, whose business we are here about, be invoked to play the strings of our lyre in order that its song might profoundly affect and sway the minds of all. And indeed, to accomplish this, neither the syllogisms nor the attitudes of the orator are requisite: what we desire is for the truth itself to be made manifest—and with the truth, the more simply it is stated, the more potent is its force.

At the outset, it is not pleasant to be forced to restate the old, but, sad to relate, only too just complaint—perhaps never more just than in these days—that now, when men are dedicating themselves with such devoted attention to all studies, the philosophy of Christ alone is sneered at by some—even Christians!—is neglected by many, and is discussed by few, and then in a detached fashion (I shall not add, and without conviction). In all the other branches of learning which engage human ingenuity, there is nothing so hidden or obscure, but that the brilliance of genius has ferreted it out; nothing so intransigent, but that it has been conquered by concentrated effort. How then does it come about that even those of us who regard ourselves as Christians have failed to embrace this philosophy alone? Platonists, Pythagoreans, Academics, Stoics, Cynics, Peripatetics and Epicureans not only possess a deep understanding of the doctrines of their sects, but even commit them to memory and fight savagely in their defense, willing rather to die than surrender the cause of their respective masters. Why then do we not display far greater spirit for Christ, our master and prince? Who would not regard it as shameful that one who professed the Aristotelian philosophy did not know Aristotle's position on the causes of lightning, prime matter, or infinity? Note, too, that possession of this knowledge no more yields a man happiness, than the lack of it yields unhappiness. Should we, then, privileged in so many ways, attached by so many sacraments to Christ, not

regard it as sinful and evil to know nothing of His doctrines? Doctrines which proffer the most assured happiness to all?

But there would be no purpose served in attempting to magnify this matter into a full-blown controversy, since it involves what I might call an evil distortion to even attempt a comparison between Christ and Zeno or Aristotle; or to attempt a comparison between Christ's teachings and, to put it mildly, the vapid precepts of such men. Let those who will exalt the leaders of their factions as they will; certainly He alone who came from Heaven was a teacher; He alone could teach unassailable doctrine, since He taught eternal wisdom; He alone, the sole author of human salvation, taught what pertains to salvation; He alone fully underwrites whatever He taught; He alone is able to grant that which He promised. Should anything be brought to us from the Chaldeans or Egyptians, we delve avidly into its examination because it comes to us from a strange land—for part of its worth derives from its having come to us from far off. Again, we are often tormented with anxiety by the fabrications of some insignificant or fraudulent man, not only without profit to ourselves, but also at great cost in time (I am not adding here an even more serious consequent, for as it stands the matter is serious enough). But why is it that a similar desire does not also stimulate Christian minds: minds that are convinced that this teaching, in fact, has come not from Egypt or Syria, but from Heaven itself? Why do we not all recognize that this must be a new and marvelous kind of philosophy since, in order to transmit it to mortals, He who is God became man; He who is immortal became mortal; He who is in the Father's heart came down to earth? Whatever else the content of this philosophy, it must be regarded as possessed of a profound and singular matter, because its splendid author descended to teach it after many generations of illustrious philosophers and remarkable prophets had had their say. Why then, out of pious curiosity, do we not investigate, weigh and analyze each tenet? Especially as this kind of wisdom,

so extraordinary as to render finally foolish all the accumulated learning of this world, may be gleaned from its few books as from the the clearest stream, with far less effort—and I shall not add, with how much greater reward—than Aristotle's doctrine is extracted from so many obscure tomes, and from those massive commentaries of his innumerable interpreters, all of whom are in disagreement. There is here no prerequisite of difficult sciences. It is an easy journey, and one that can be made by anyone. Bring only a receptive and pious mind, a pure and candid faith. Be but gentle, and you have already advanced far in this philosophy. It itself provides inspiration: it is as a teacher which communicates itself to no one more readily than to those of an open mind. The precepts of the others, aside from the fact that they hold out the false hope of attaining happiness, often frustrate one's natural talents by the complexity of their principles. This doctrine, on the other hand, makes itself available to all in a corresponding degree: it bends over to the little ones, adjusts itself to their measure, and nourishes them with milk, supporting them, fostering them, sustaining them, and performing everything necessary until they grow in Christ. Again, it not only serves the lowliest, but serves as well as an object of wonder to those in the highest places; and the further one ferrets out its riches, the further one removes it from the shadow of domination by any other. It is, to the little one, a small affair; to the great, it is more momentous than the highest. It rejects no age, sex, fortune, or position in life. The sun itself is no more open and accessible to all than is the teaching of Christ. It holds no one at a distance except those who, denying themselves, choose to stay away.

Indeed, I find myself strongly opposed to those who maintain that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, should not be read by the uneducated: as if Christ taught such esoteric doctrines that they could be understood only by some few theologians; or as if the Christian religion derived its force from men's ignorance of its tenets! It may be the case that the mysteries of kings are best con-

cealed, but Christ wishes His mysteries broadcast as widely as possible. I wish that even the lowliest of women could read the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul! I would like to see these translated into all languages, so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irishmen, but as well by Turks and Saracens. Surely, the first step consists in understanding. It may happen that many will jeer—but some may be captivated. I would like to see farmers singing some portion of these writings while at the plow; weavers humming them to the accompaniment of the shuttle; and travelers lightening the tediousness of their journey with stories drawn from Scripture! Let the subject matter of all Christian conversation be supplied by this source: in general, our daily conversations reveal us for what we are. Let each man comprehend what he can; let him retell as much as he is able. Let he who lags behind not envy him who has forged ahead; let those in the van encourage, not chasten, those in the rear. Why do we limit to a few that profession which is common to all? Since baptism, in which there is the first profession of Christian philosophy, is common in an equal degree to all Christians, and since the other sacraments, as well as the reward of immortality, belong equally to all, it is simply not appropriate that its doctrine alone be reserved to a few theologians or monks—the very persons who, although they make up one of the smallest segments of the Christian population, I would wish were like what they are supposed to be. For I fear that one can find among the theologians some who are not at all what their title implies—men, that is, who deal in earthly rather than divine matters—and that among the monks there are some who, while professing the poverty of Christ and *contemptus mundi*, yet remain themselves quite attached to worldliness. As I see it, he is a true theologian who teaches not by syllogism, but by the direction of his mind, by his very mien, his eyes, and his whole life, that riches are to be despised; that the Christian should not put his faith in the goods of this world but must rely wholly on Heaven; that wrongs should not be avenged; that a blessing should be

returned for an evil; that we should merit good from those who do us evil; that all good men should be equally loved and cherished as members of the same body; that evil should be borne if it cannot be corrected; that those who are stripped of their goods, those who are dispossessed, and those who mourn are blessed, and should not be deplored; and that the devout should look forward to death, as it is nothing more than the passage to immortality. Should anyone, even a common laborer or weaver, inspired by the spirit of Christ, preach, inculcate, incite, encourage, and exhort men to this kind of doctrine, he is in fact a true theologian! Should anyone exhibit this doctrine by the life he lives, he indeed is a great doctor! Anyone, even a non-Christian, may ably and subtly dispute the manner in which angels understand; but to induce us here to lead an angelic life, free from all sin, this is the true task of the Christian theologian.

Should anyone object that these are rather stupid and crude notions, I would reply simply that Christ taught precisely these vulgar notions, that the Apostles respected them, and that however crude they seem, they have yet given birth to a great throng of illustrious and genuinely Christian martyrs. This philosophy, unlettered as it appears to these same detractors, has drawn to its precepts the world's great princes, and numerous kingdoms and peoples: an achievement which neither the power of tyrants nor the erudition of philosophers can claim.

Now I do not object to philosophical discussions being carried on among the learned if they deem them worthwhile. But let the lowly mass of Christians take security and comfort simply from their being Christian: for whether or not the Apostles and the other Fathers understood these subtleties, it is yet certain that they did not teach them. If, in the execution of their offices, princes would display what has been referred to as a "vulgar" doctrine, if priests would preach it in their sermons, if schoolmasters would inculcate it in their students rather than that learning which they draw from the fonts of Aristotle and Averroës, then Chris-

tians would not be so plagued on all sides by unrelenting wars, affairs would not be characterized by mad frenzies to attain wealth by any and all means, and every subject, sacred as well as profane, would not everywhere be made to resound with such quantities of noisy disputation: we would, in fine, differ from those who are not Christians by more than mere name and ceremonial. For the obligation of either renewing or furthering the Christian religion has been placed principally upon these three groups of men: on the princes and magistrates who represent them, on the bishops and their delegated priests, and on those who instruct the knowledge-hungry young. Should it ever come about that these men, setting aside their own interests, were to sincerely work together in Christ, we would surely see emerging in a short time a true and—as Paul puts it—a genuine race of Christians: a people who would restore the philosophy of Christ, not in rituals and syllogistic arguments, but in the heart and in the whole of life itself. These weapons will prove of greater efficacy than arms and ultimatums in drawing the enemies of Christianity to the faith of Christ. In the conquest of any citadel, nothing is more powerful than the truth.

He is no Platonist who has not read Plato's writings. Is he a theologian, let alone a Christian, who has not read the literature of Christ? *He who loves me keeps my Word*, says Christ: a distinguishing mark which He himself descried. Therefore, if we are truly and sincerely Christian, if we believe truly in Him who was sent from Heaven to teach us that which was not present in all the teachings of the philosophers, if we truly expect from Him that which no prince, however powerful, can give, how can anything be more important to us than His literature? How can anything give the appearance of wisdom which does not accord with His Word? Why, in the case of this literature, which ought to be given due reverence, do we allow ourselves (shall I say, to a greater degree than the secular commentators do in the case of the imperial laws or the books of the physicians?), to say whatever comes into our heads, to dis-

tort, and to obfuscate? We pull heavenly teaching down to the level of our own lives as if it were a Lydian rule; and while seeking with all our skill to avoid giving the appearance of ignorance, and being thus led to pursue whatever is held to be of account in secular literature, that which is of special value in Christian philosophy I shall not say we corrupt, but—and none can gainsay this—we restrict to a select company, although Christ wished nothing to be more public. In this philosophy, anchored as it is more in a tendency of the mind than in syllogisms, life means more than debate, inspiration is preferable to learning, and transformation is more important than intellectual comprehension. Only a very few can be learned: all can be Christian, all can be devout, and all—I boldly insist—all can be theologians!

This philosophy, as a matter of fact, especially designed to accord with human nature, is easily comprehended. But then what else is the philosophy of Christ, which He Himself called a rebirth, than the restoration of human nature to its original well-formed state? Now, although no one has ever taught this philosophy more perfectly and with more effect than Christ, one may nonetheless, it is true, discover in the books of the pagans a great deal which agrees with His teaching. There was never a school of philosophy so depraved as to teach that money makes a man happy; nor has there ever been one so coarse as to place his chief good in vulgar honors and pleasures. The Stoics understood that no one was wise who was not good; they understood that nothing but virtue was truly good or noble, and that nothing but baseness was evil. According to Plato, Socrates taught in various ways that injustice was not to be repaid with injustice, and that also, since the soul is immortal, those who have led a righteous life not be mourned when they die, as they are assured of an even happier life to come. He taught, further, that the soul must be drawn away from the bodily disposition and directed toward its true and invisible goal. Aristotle tells us in the *Politics* that nothing whatsoever, even if it is not to be despised, can be truly delightful to us except virtue alone. Even Epicurus

avers that nothing in a man's life can bring joy unless the mind is free of evil, from which condition true pleasure wells up as from a freshet. What shall we conclude from this: that many—Socrates, Diogenes, and Epictetus, among others—have set forth a good part of Christ's teaching? Since Christ both taught and established the same doctrine in a much more complete manner than any of them, is it not fantastic that Christians either ignore, neglect, or ridicule it? If there is anything particularly Christian to be found in the writings of these ancients, let us follow them. But if these alone could truly give us Christianity, why do we regard these writings as even more irrelevant and insignificant for this purpose than the Books of Moses?

First we must know what He taught; next, we must translate this into action. I believe, therefore, that no one should think himself to be Christian because he disputes about particulars, relations, quiddities, and formalities with an obfuscating and tantalizing confusion of words, but rather because he maintains and displays what Christ taught and exhibited. It is not that I condemn the labors of those who utilize their native intellectual gifts, not without merit, in such subtle discussions—I do not wish to offend anyone—but I do feel, and rightly, unless I am badly mistaken, that the pure and genuine philosophy of Christ cannot be drawn from any source more abundantly than from the evangelical books and the apostolic letters. Concerning these works, if anyone should devoutly philosophize —praying rather than disputing, and seeking transformation rather than battle—he would doubtless find that there is nothing touching on man's life and happiness which is not taught, analyzed, and clarified in them. If we really wish to learn, why is some one author regarded as more informative than Christ himself? If we seek a pattern for our lives, why does some other example take precedence over that of Christ himself? If we seek some medicine against the insistent pressures of the soul, why do we feel the remedy is more readily available somewhere else? If we

wish to inspire a soul that is listless and grown lazy from reading, where else, I ask, can you find sparks of such vivacity and efficacy? If the soul becomes wearied by the vexatiousness of this life, why are other delights sought out as more soothing? Why have we doggedly insisted upon discovering the writings of authors other than Christ himself? And He, He who promised to stand by us all of our days, even 'til the world's end, stands forth especially in His literature: writings in which He now lives, breathes, and speaks for us almost more effectively than when He dwelt among men. The Jews at that time saw and heard less of Him than you can now see and hear in the Books of the Gospels, if you will but make proper use of your eyes and ears.

Just what sort of an affair is this, I ask? We preserve the letters written by a dear friend, we kiss them tenderly, we bear them about with us, and constantly read and reread them; and yet there are many thousands of Christians who, even though learned in other areas, have never read in all their lives the evangelical and apostolic books! The Mohammedans hold fast to their teachings; the Jews, even today, study practically from the cradle the Books of Moses; why is it that we do not similarly make ourselves knowledgeable about Christ? Those who observe the way of Benedict, profess, study, and absorb a rule written by a man. Those who are members of the Augustinian Order are well acquainted with the rule of their founder. The Franciscans revere and love the unique tradition of their Francis, and wherever they go, to whatever corner of the earth, they carry these along: indeed, they do not feel secure unless his little book is with them and on their person. What makes these men attribute more to a man-made rule than the Christian world does to its rule, a rule delivered to all and which all have equally professed in baptism? And in the last analysis, although one may cite even a thousand rules, can there be anything more holy than the Christian? I would that this should come to pass; just as Paul wrote that the Mosaic Law was not to be compared with the glory of the Gospel which succeeded it, so may all Christians

come to regard the Gospels and the letters of the Apostles as so holy that all other writings, by comparison, appear profane.

That which others wish to attribute to Albert the Great, to Alexander, to Thomas, to Aegidius, to Richard or to Ockham, so far as I am concerned, they are free to do; I have no wish to defame anyone, nor to raise a cry against the labors of such reputable men. But however learned their writings, however subtle, however seraphic, if you will, it must yet be yielded by all that the writings of Holy Scripture are the truest and best. Paul wishes us to test the spirits of those who prophesy, to see whether they are of God. Augustine himself, reading every kind of book with judgment and discretion, asks that his own works be given a fair hearing. It is in the literature of Holy Scripture alone, that that which is not understood is yet to be accepted and revered. And no mere school of theologians vouches for the authority of this author: that has come from the Heavenly Father himself on two occasions, through the testimony of the divine voice: first, during the Baptism at the Jordan, and then at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. This, He says, *is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear Him.* "O durable and indestructible authority," to quote the theologians! What is the sense of this *hear Him?* Without doubt, He is the one and only teacher; let us be disciples of Him alone. Extol as you will the works of your favorite authority, this *hear Him* has been said without exception of Christ alone. In confirmation of the Father's testimony, a dove first descended upon Him. Next, Peter, to whom the Highest Pastor thrice entrusted the feeding of His sheep, bore His spirit: and he fed them, doubtless, on the food of Christian doctrine. This Spirit was reborn, as it were, in Paul, whom He himself called the *chosen vessel* and regarded as an extraordinary herald of His name. What it was that John had plumbed from the sacred font of His heart, is found in his writings. What, I ask, is there which is comparable in the works of Scotus? What in Thomas? (I do not want this remark taken as abusive: I

admire the skill of the one as I revere the sanctity of the other.) Why then do we not all apply ourselves to philosophy as it is found in the inspired authors? Why do we not carry their works about on our persons and keep them ever at hand? Why do we not pore over these works, examine them minutely, and assiduously analyze them? Why devote most of our lives to Averroës rather than the Gospels? Why spend so many hours of our lives upon man-made decrees and self-contradictory opinions? It may at present be the fashion of our more outstanding theologians, if you please, to occupy themselves in this latter manner; but assuredly, the primary task of great theologians yet to come will be to study the writings of Holy Scripture!

Let those of us who have been pledged in the words of Christ at our baptism, confirm the sincerity of that pledge by being completely filled with His teachings from the very moment of our parents' first embraces and our nurse's caresses. For that impression, which the soft clay vessel of the soul first receives, settles most deeply and clings most tenaciously. Let our first lispings be of Christ; let our earliest childhood be shaped by the Gospels of Him whom I would have presented in such a manner that children, too, would love Him. For just as the severity of some teachers causes their young charges to detest literature even before they are able to comprehend it, so there are those who present the philosophy of Christ as gloomy and depressing, although, in truth, nothing could be more sweetly beautiful. Let our children immerse themselves, then, in these studies until, in time, in silent growth, they mature into robust manhood in Christ. The literature of other authors is such that many have greatly repented the labor expended upon them; and it happens repeatedly that those who would have fought a lifelong battle, even unto death, to defend the principles of that literature, divorce themselves completely from their chosen author's coterie upon their deathbed. But how exalted the man whom death takes as he meditates upon the literature of Christ! Let us all, therefore, love this literature with our whole heart: let us embrace it, and let us continu-

ally busy ourselves with it, let us devotedly kiss it, and let us, at the last, die in its embrace and be transformed in it, since studies, indeed, become transformed into conduct. As for he who is unable to pursue this course, (but who, in fact, is unable?), let him at least revere this literature which contains, as it were, His divine heart. Should anyone show us Christ's footprints, how we then, as Christians, genuflect—how we worship them! Why do we not adore instead the living and breathing likeness of Him contained in these Books? If someone were to exhibit Christ's robe, to what corner of the world would we not speed so that we might kiss it? Yet were his entire wardrobe to be displayed, it would not bring Christ forth more clearly and truly than He is brought forth in the Gospels. For Christ's love, we adorn wooden and stone statues with gold and gems: why not, rather, punctuate with gold, gems, and ornaments of even greater price, if there be any such, those writings which bring us Christ so much more effectively than any mere image? These latter—if, indeed, at all representative of Him—exhibit merely the bodily form; but His literature brings us the living image of His holy mind: the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ Himself—and in this way they render Him so completely present that even if we were to gaze upon Him with our very eyes, we would yet not be able to behold Him with such clarity.